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"Recent Communal Violence in Gujarat, India, and the U.S. Response": Kamal Mitra Chenoy Testimony

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- The events in Gujarat from 27 February 2002 mark a turning point in contemporary Indian politics. These have profound consequences for the continuation of India as a multi-cultural, secular society, for survival of democracy, and for the unity and integrity of the country. There have been riots and pogroms in India before but the Gujarat carnage is exceptional in the extent of state sponsorship, official justification and cover-up, the suborning of the state apparatus, and the legitimization of genocide as an instrument of electoral politics.

- Gujarat has a history of sectarian [communal] violence, going back to decades before Indian independence in 1947. The small town of Godhra is no exception. There was communal tension in the town and the State because of proposed Hindu rites at a disputed site in the town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Hindu volunteers travelling in the Sabarmati Express train to Ayodhya or back to Ahmedabad in Gujarat, had reportedly been misbehaving with Muslim passengers, both men and women, for days without any police intervention. Around 7.45AM on 27th February some incidents at Godhra station, including the attempted abduction of a teenaged Muslim girl by a Hindu volunteer travelling on the train, led to stone throwing, followed by an attack by a Muslim mob of 2,000 from nearby slums when the train was stopped half a mile away. 1,500 Hindu volunteers on the train countered with stone throwing. Firebombs were used by the Muslim mob, and one railway coach was burnt leading to the deaths of 59 Hindu passengers, mainly women and children. This incident, which was a communal riot in a town with a long history of communal outbreaks, became the trigger and justification for the carnage that followed.

- The Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi, who is also a senior RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sanghathan: National Volunteer Organization--a Hindu fundamentalist organization] leader, arrived in Godhra and alleged that the attack on the train was planned by Pakistani intelligence [the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)]. This charge was repeated a couple of days later by federal Home Minister L.K. Advani, also a Member of Parliament from Gandhinagar, the capitol of Gujarat. Ministers alleged that the same terrorist groups who had attacked the American Center in Kolkata were behind the Godhra attack, and promised to teach them a lesson. Consequently an impression was created with official sanction, that the Godhra Muslims were agents of Pakistan, a traditional enemy. The Chief Minister insisted that the badly charred bodies of the

victims be sent for post mortem to Ahmedabad the same night. The time of arrival of the bodies was announced over the government radio and frenzied mobs came to the railway station to receive the bodies. Ram dhuns [religious rites] were performed that night and the next day all over Ahmedabad. The same day, the Vishva Hindu Parishad [World Hindu Council] called for a 'bandh' [a total strike including stoppage of traffic] on February 28th in protest against Godhra. The ruling Bhartiya Janata Party [BJP] supported the bandh, and the Chief Minister reportedly told top officials, including from the police, to refrain from interfering with the bandh supporters.

- On 28th February organized Hindu mobs, sometimes as large as 20,000 controlled Ahmedabad, while the police stood by. VHP-Bajrang Dal [an RSS affiliate]-BJP workers organized the mobs and led them. The Minister of State for Home Affairs Gordhan Zadaphia flashed the 'V' for victory sign while passing rampaging mobs. Zadaphia and another Minister sat in the police control rooms in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar for hours, reportedly immobilizing the police and fire brigade but directing the mobs. Mobs were transported by trucks and buses. They had detailed lists of Muslim institutions, commercial establishments, residences and shrines. These were looted and burnt. The information was so detailed that even shops with minority Muslim ownership were identified and attacked. The mobs carried thousands of liquefied petroleum gas [(LPG) cooking gas] cylinders which were used to blow up the properties they attacked. Significantly, these LPG cylinders had been in short supply for weeks. There were widespread attacks on Muslim men, women and children who were hacked with knives and swords, and in many cases, later burnt. There were many cases of rape and gang rape, even of minor girls, and a large number of the victims were then brutally killed. To cite just a couple of instances: a former Congress Member of Parliament Ehsan Jafri who had campaigned against the Chief Minister in an Assembly election weeks earlier, called for help for hours but no help came, instead a huge mob attacked his residential colony in Chamanpura. He was hacked into three pieces and the rioters reportedly urinated on his body. Ten women were stripped, raped, hacked and thrown into fires. Only one survived. In Naroda-Patia where more than 90 people were killed and many women and girls raped, an eight month pregnant woman Kausar Bano's belly was slit open, the fetus extracted and both were killed. The police, in most cases, not only did not intervene to protect the Muslims, but in many cases connived with the rioters. In Naroda-Patia, the Special Reserve Police refused shelter to the Muslims and forced them in the direction of waiting mobs. More Muslims than Hindus were killed in police firing. Curfew was imposed more in Muslim localities than in Hindu ones.

- Unlike in earlier episodes, anti-Muslim violence spread later even to rural areas, including tribal areas, apart from other urban centers. According to official estimates, less than 1,000 people have died, overwhelmingly Muslim. Informed unofficial figures are much higher around 2,500 but the death toll may be even higher when the list of the missing, particularly in the rural areas, is checked. The property and business losses are colossal and official compensation is selective and niggardly. Very large numbers of Muslims have no viable shelter to return to. Many like those from Naroda-Patia are scared to go back. Hundreds of Muslim shrines have been destroyed and desecrated. The shrine of the medieval saint-poet Wali Gujarati was razed to the ground and a round built over it.

More than 100,000 Muslims live in NGO-run relief camps throughout Gujarat. The State does not run these camps and provides insufficient uncooked food and other essentials for them. For example, the largest camp in Shah Alam in Ahmedabad has 12,000 inmates but only 22 toilets.

- The official machinery has been obstructive in registering cases against the allegedly guilty. In most cases, the police have not filed charge sheets. In the relatively few cases in which these have been filed, in most cases the names of the accused are not mentioned and only an anonymous mob is cited, making the cases legally very weak. In the few cases charge sheets have been filed, key BJP operatives have been excluded. And in most of these cases the Muslims are shown as having incited the violence. For example, in the Ehsan Jafri case it is recorded that he fired first on the mob, whereas there is no evidence that Jafri fired at all.

- Police officers and civil service officers who controlled violence in various parts of Gujarat were summarily transferred to other areas, and other, more pliable officers posted in their stead. Officers sympathetic to the BJP were posted to investigate crucial cases like Naroda-Patia and Chamanpura. This is a pattern throughout the State.

- All official propaganda referred to the Godhra incident as a 'carnage' and the subsequent violence as 'disturbances.' This was true not only of the Chief Minister but also of the Prime Minister in the initial stages. This was intended to explain away the genocide against Muslims as a 'natural' reaction to the killings in Godhra. So some 2,500 killings were a 'disturbance' while 59 were a 'carnage.'

- In April, well before the violence ceased, the Chief Minister advocated elections to the State Assembly. Clearly the attempt was to cash in on the communal polarization and the antipathy of Hindus towards the minority communities [Muslims, Christians] to bolster the BJP's electoral prospects. A number of political commentators have alleged that the basic reason for the communal violence in Gujarat was electoral, an attempt to consolidate the Hindu votes. The public outcry against elections in a disturbed and disrupted State, forced the federal government to rule out immediate elections.

- On the basis of such information and analysis, the National Human Rights Commission [NHRC] and various non-official inquiries have exposed the state-complicity and according to some, state-sponsorship of the anti-Muslim violence. It appears that this pogrom and genocide was organized some months prior to February. The preparation of the detailed lists of Muslim properties, institutions and residences would have taken months of prior planning. Similarly, the stocking of LPG cylinders, weapons, organization of transport, deployment of forces, would have taken time and considerable organization.

- Despite such reports, the BJP State government is contemptuous of such criticism. It dismissed the NHRC report as insulting the sentiments of millions of Gujaratis. Police intelligence has reported that the Chief Minister in recent weeks has campaigned in rural areas implicitly castigating the Muslims on the basis of a Hindu fundamentalist agenda. Just a couple of days ago the Governor of Gujarat, a RSS leader, stated that Assembly elections were now possible. So the cynical game plan of the State government to make electoral gains at the cost of a section of its own electorate has been exposed once again.

- The Gujarat genocide has very serious implications for Indian democracy. India is the most variegated and diverse society in the world. It has some 3,000 communities speaking some 150 languages and dialects. Any attempt to impose a rigid Hindu fundamentalist agenda on such a diverse people is bound to lead to vigorous resistance, possibly Balkanization. If a State government, like in Gujarat, is able to carry out genocide with impunity, it means that the secular edifice that guarantees multicultural democracy in India has been gravely eroded. This is bound to have a demonstration effect all over the country. Muslims are around 14 % of the population. When a section of the Sikhs who totaled just 2% of the population revolted against Indian rule with Pakistani support, in the 1980's there was a bloodbath. In the case of Muslims, given the Pakistan-backed insurgency in Muslim-majority Kashmir which has brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war, the threat is even greater. If the Muslims of Gujarat feel that they will not receive justice, as seems very likely, some of them and other co-religionists may be drawn to terrorism to seek revenge. In view of Pakistan's support to anti-Indian terrorists, there is every possibility of such embittered individuals obtaining foreign support. If rumors about Al- Qaeda presence in Indian Kashmir are correct, then such elements may well link up with Al-Qaeda. After the Mumbai riots in December 1992-January 1993, the Mafia don Dawood Ibrahim linked up with Pakistani intelligence and unleashed terrorism in India. So a similar linkage with the addition of Islamic fundamentalists like Al-Qaeda is perfectly conceivable.

- The just resolution of the Gujarat genocide is thus vital not only for the survival of a multi-cultural, secular, democratic India but also for the stability and peace of the sub-continent. It has possible implications for the global fight against terrorism.